

## CHAPTER 1

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### HOPE IN BLASTED LANDSCAPES

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In early November 2010, the multitude of creative agents animating the Multispecies Salon in New Orleans descended on a warehouse, the Ironworks, and hastily remodeled it as an art gallery. There curators gathered together some sixty artworks orbiting around a central question: “In the aftermath of disasters—in blasted landscapes that have been transformed by multiple catastrophes—what are the possibilities of biocultural hope?” The Ironworks became a site where culture workers who were deeply implicated in sweeping political, economic, and ecological transformations cautiously explored future horizons in the wake of recent disasters that put New Orleans in the national spotlight.<sup>1</sup> The opening night of the exhibit coincided with the Second Saturday Art Walk in the emerging Saint Claude Arts District. Hundreds flocked to the Ironworks, crowding to see a recycled fashion show by Calamity, a designer who outfitted models in postapocalyptic garb and crust-punk drag. The usual crowd of bike-riding twenty-somethings was there in full force. A strong current of cleaner-cut middle-aged viewers and a sprinkling of out-of-towners rounded out the masses. “I flew down from New York for this,” a beaming fifty-year-old noted as she slipped on headphones to hear the beehive of the SOUND::MEDICINE::HOUSE installation, composed of wood and plants salvaged from nearby blighted buildings.

Dark, dystopic images, a digital rendering of fugitive emissions from nearby oil refineries, flickered overhead.<sup>2</sup> Illustrations of deformed and crippled insects, collected from the shadows of nuclear disasters, covered a makeshift plywood wall.<sup>3</sup> Images of chemical oceanographers—working to



**FIGURE 1.1** Video still from David Sullivan, *Fugitive Emissions*, a continuously looping, animated 3D painting in HD with sound (2008). See [multispecies-salon.org/sullivan](http://multispecies-salon.org/sullivan). Courtesy of the artist.

make sense of molecular and microbial transformations taking place near the site of the Deepwater Horizon explosion—fueled discussions about upcoming protests against BP and funeral processions for the creatures killed by the flood of oil in the Gulf of Mexico. One might expect that this accumulated evidence of advancing disasters—a perfect storm of human follies and agencies beyond the control of gallery visitors—might dampen their revelry. Instead, these signs of calamity strangely fueled a celebratory atmosphere in which it seemed as if anything might happen at any time.<sup>4</sup>

Amid revelry in the wreckage of natural and fiscal catastrophes we found semi-empowered intellectuals who were embracing and tussling with forms of collective desire. Powerful forces have tried to appropriate the very idea of hope.<sup>5</sup> As a vacuous political slogan, “hope” has bulldozed over our dreams.<sup>6</sup> Yet artists, scientists, and other culture workers gathered together at the Multispecies Salon to engage in strategic storytelling about Hope in Blasted Landscapes.<sup>7</sup> Building on the critical insights of these storytellers, this essay explores the persistence of life in the face of catastrophe. Following people, and following multiple species, from the art gallery to the blasted landscapes of New Orleans and beyond, we trace the contours of modest forms of bio-cultural hope.<sup>8</sup>

## OIL IN WATER

The flood of oil spreading in the Gulf set the backdrop for the Multispecies Salon in New Orleans.<sup>9</sup> When news of oil plumes first reached Jacqueline Bishop, an artist who teaches at Loyola University, she was hardly surprised. Some five years earlier, she had created *Trespass*, an uncanny illustration of disasters looming on future horizons. First exhibited in the months before Hurricane Katrina, this assemblage of flotsam and jetsam—baby shoes and birds' nests, toys and balls of twine—contained aesthetic premonitions of the floating debris that were omnipresent after the storm. Coated in a black patina, a dark, glossy finish like crude oil, this artwork also prefigured the oil flood that came in 2010. At first blush, from far away, *Trespass* seems to just be a collection of wreckage—a dreadful rendering of disaster. When viewed from the middle distance, it appears to shimmer and dance about like oil in water—moving in different directions, coalescing around a heterogeneous collection of objects. Scrutinizing this aqueous landscape at a close range, moving in even closer still, reveals that it is populated with hopeful figures.

A figure might be regarded as “a fashioning, a resemblance, a shape; also a chimerical vision,” following Nathan Bailey’s *Dictionarium Britannicum* of 1730.<sup>10</sup> “To figure” also means to have a role in a story.<sup>11</sup> Gathering up desires, figures serve as anchoring points for dreams.<sup>12</sup> If, at a distance, *Trespass* seems to be a uniform black morass—prefiguring Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil flood—closer inspection reveals colorful organisms hiding in the shadows. Mushrooms, seed pods, and birds’ eggs anchor hopes in living forms. Like a bird’s nest, built from scavenged detritus, *Trespass* nurtures hopeful dreams. The figural play of this assemblage works with shifts of scale: A sea slick with oil and wreckage, an unfathomable disaster when viewed from afar, contains anchoring points for hopeful desires that can be grasped on a molecular level. Zooming in reveals that when droplets merge together, when they grab hold of almost imperceptible figures, they generate dynamic coalescences.<sup>13</sup> Panning back out reveals the dance of oil in water.

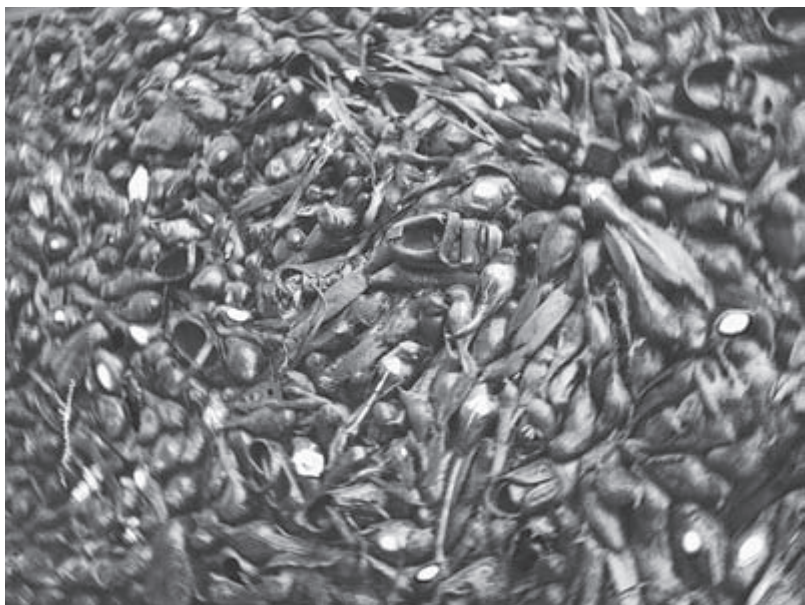
Looking to possible futures, rather than to absolute endings, Jacques Derrida draws a helpful distinction between *apocalyptic* and *messianic* thinking.<sup>14</sup> Messianic hopes contain “the attraction, invincible élan or affirmation of an unpredictable future-to-come (or even of a past-to-come-again),” writes Derrida.<sup>15</sup> “Not only must one not renounce the emancipatory desire, it is necessary to insist on it more than ever.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Derrida’s sense of expectation is not oriented toward a specific messiah.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Christian traditions, which pin hopes to a particular figure, Jesus Christ, Derrida’s notion of

**FIGURE 1.2** Outsiders unaccustomed to the celebratory antics of New Orleans, a city with a venerated history of macabre pageantry, might have overlooked subtle and thought-provoking elements of the fashion show staged at the Multispecies Salon. Some of the garb on display included fur from the pelts of nutria, a large amphibious rodent originally from South America. Calamity, a fashion designer pictured here in a nutria coat, works with the Righteous Fur collective to probe ethical issues linked to the killing of this “invasive” animal. Image courtesy of Jonathan Traviesa. See [multispecies-salon.org/calamity](http://multispecies-salon.org/calamity).

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Nutria were once farmed for their fur. The species was imported to the United States in the nineteenth century to support trends in high fashion. As fur became less fashionable, wild nutria populations exploded in North America. “We used to have a big nutria trapping industry,” said Elizabeth Shannon, a licensed alligator hunter and ecoartist who exhibited her work in the Salon. “But the price of nutria went down to about a dollar a hide. So my friends basically stopped trapping.” Lately, the prolific species has been damaging human infrastructures. Jefferson Parish, the district that includes most suburbs of New Orleans, largely lies below sea level and is kept dry by an elaborate series of dykes and canals. “Nutria have seriously weakened the canal banks by overgrazing and building a labyrinth of tunnels under the surface,” says Marnie Winter, director of environmental affairs for Jefferson Parish. “The burrows are interconnected in a sort of honeycomb pattern so that some extend under the surface as much as fifty to one hundred fifty feet. Occasionally, severe tunnelling in a small area will cause a section of canal bank to collapse into the canal. . . . Patches of grass that hold the canal banks in place have been grazed down to the bare ground by these voracious critters.” Calamity was reinvesting nutria with use value, drawing the nomadic species into micro-biopolitical networks of matter and meaning. By generating a new market for nutria pelts and thereby creating economic incentives for trappers to remove animals from Louisiana bayous, he scripted this species into what Haraway might regard as story of lively capital, where commerce and consciousness, ethics and aesthetics were all in play.





**FIGURES 1.3–1.4** Jacqueline Bishop, *Trespass*, mixed media made with artificial birds, baby shoes, bird nests, and toys, 59.5" × 97.5", 2003–2004. Courtesy of the artist and Arthur Roger Gallery. Photographs by Eben Kirksey. See [multispecies-salon.org/bishop](http://multispecies-salon.org/bishop).

messianicity is “without content.” Celebrating messianic desires that operate beyond the confines of any particular figure, he describes a universal structure of feeling that works independently of any specific historical moment or cultural location: “The universal, quasi-transcendental structure that I call *messianicity without messianism*,” writes Derrida, “is not bound up with any particular moment of (political or general) history or culture.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, his notion of messianicity is not attached to a specific figure, event, political project, or messiah.<sup>19</sup>

The empty dreamscape of Derrida is haunted by a messianic spirit that refuses to be grounded in any particular figure. Jacqueline Bishop’s imagination, by contrast, contains multiple specific objects of desire. In Bishop’s work, we found a cautious spirit searching through refuse, coalescing around specific figures, and then dancing away again on other lines of flight. When we first encountered *Trespass* in Bishop’s studio in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans, our visit became an opportunity for her to tell a circuitous story about how she found hope, without even going to look for it, in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon explosion on April 20, 2010. For Bishop, the uninterrupted flood of oil was an actualization of her worst nightmares, the horrible environmental disaster she had long imagined.

Bishop’s first impulse, in the early weeks of the oil flood, was to travel to Louisiana’s Gulf Coast. Initially she wanted to collect some of the oil, to use the potent substance in her artwork. Powerful fumes, a haunting cloud of toxicity, was hanging over Grand Isle—a sleepy beach town visited by Bishop that was quickly becoming the epicenter of the oil flood, as well as of the efforts to clean it up.<sup>20</sup> Spectatorship was officially discouraged by BP and government officials who were playing rhetorically with the potential harm of toxic vapors and substances. Rigid codes of conduct and access restrictions were put in place ostensibly to protect the public’s safety. “They didn’t want to get anybody hurt,” Bishop told us with a smirk. Safety protocol kept journalists, independent researchers, and curious members of the public off the beaches and meant that the BP contractors who took control of the cleanup were working under a veil of secrecy. People who marched past BP’s cordon themselves became objects of heightened scrutiny and surveillance. “The toxicity is why no one was allowed on the beaches, why the beaches were closed,” Bishop said. “I had access as long as I was with park rangers. There were some people who drifted off, not abiding [by] the rules and the signs. A couple walked down the beach, and when they came back, [the BP contractors] stripped them, made them take all their clothes off, completely nude:

‘Check their clothes, check their bodies to make sure nothing happened to them, we have these laws for a reason.’”

Forthright claims about toxicity were taken seriously on Louisiana’s Gulf Coast, for the truth was immediately assumed to be in excess of the official estimation. The human health effects of emissions from the petrochemical industry in the Gulf routinely have been low-balled or rendered imperceptible by blunt toxicological methodology. Downriver from one of the more chemical-drenched regions of the country—a section of the Mississippi River called Cancer Alley—Gulf Coast residents were long accustomed to taking precaution into their own hands as a result of corporate and governmental abdication.<sup>21</sup> Bishop was quick to understand how the specter of toxicity was functioning as a means of social control on Grand Isle. She also quickly realized that actual chemical hazards were at play.

The reaction of Jacqueline Bishop’s own body to Corexit, the chemical being sprayed on the Gulf to “disperse” the oil flood, became the source of critical ambivalence about this poison that was being used as a cure. “When I went around July 4, I didn’t bring my swamp boots,” she said. “I just had my forest boots, so I borrowed some swamp boots—they had a little bit of water in it. I didn’t realize there was Corexit in this water. About two weeks later, several layers of my skin were eaten off the bottom of my feet. I had to ask, ‘What’s the deal with my feet? Is it just from the water and the oil?’ They said, ‘No, it’s from the dispersants.’ So I came to a realization about these chemicals. If they can affect my feet so quickly, just think what they are capable of in other species.” Abandoning her plan to collect oil for use in her artwork, Bishop began to use her camera to document the extent of the disaster and to chronicle the cleanup response. She took pictures of oiled marshlands and tar balls on beaches, as well as of BP work crews—including teams of supervised inmates from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.<sup>22</sup> She also began taking an inordinate number of pictures of hermit crabs.

Bishop’s access to restricted sites was facilitated by Leanne Sarco, a ranger at Grand Isle State Park, who founded the Hermit Crab Survival Project. A recent graduate from Loyola University’s biology program, Sarco started her job at Grand Isle weeks before the Deepwater Horizon blowout. As the first oil slicks began washing onto the beach, she helplessly watched oil-drenched birds struggle. “When we initially saw oiled animals we would call the US Fish and Wildlife hotline,” Sarco said. “I was frustrated by their response. At best, it would take them an hour or two to show up. By that time, the bird had moved on or already died.” Sarco eventually stopped calling the hotline. She began asking officials if she could clean the birds herself but was told



**FIGURE 1.5** Jacqueline Bishop holding a fistful of oil on the beach of Grand Isle State Park, 2010. Weeks later, the skin of her feet began to peel off from the chemical dispersants in her borrowed boots. Photography courtesy of Jacqueline Bishop. See [multispecies-salon.org/bishop](http://multispecies-salon.org/bishop).

**FIGURES 1.6–1.7** Oil-covered hermit crabs from the Louisiana shoreline, 2010. Photograph courtesy of Jacqueline Bishop. See [multispecies-salon.org/bishop](http://multispecies-salon.org/bishop).



that several months of special training was required before she would be permitted to handle birdlife.

Amid her frustration in dealing with the official channels regulating the care of oiled birds, she saw hundreds of hermit crabs attempting to scramble ashore, only to get stuck under the sheen and suffocate. “BP and Fish and Wildlife were busy saving the birds, as well as edible wildlife—animals with either an economic benefit or a cuteness factor,” Sarco told us. “Hermit crabs were just part of the beach. When I saw the BP workers shoveling living hermit crabs covered with oil into bags for disposal, I knew I had to at least try to help them.” Sarco was predisposed to notice this unloved species—a creature that was outside centralized biopolitical regimes—because she had first encountered Grand Isle as an undergraduate, when she worked on a research project about hermit crab biology.<sup>23</sup>

Facing a bleak future, and feeling powerless as oil continued to gush into the Gulf with no end in sight, Sarco settled on a modest program of action. She called the Fish and Wildlife hotline one last time and secured permission to collect and clean the hermit crabs. Learning along the way, Sarco began to experiment with techniques for interspecies care. Falling through the bureaucratic cracks of the government’s regime for managing life, being unloved in the realms of official regulation, ironically established the possibility of life for a multitude of hermit crabs.<sup>24</sup> Upward of ten thousand animals were cared for during the Hermit Crab Survival Project. Sarco and a small cadre of volunteers cobbled together everyday technology—donated aquariums, Dr. Bronner’s soap, and household artifacts—to create a life-support system for these creatures.

Jacqueline Bishop found hope in this initiative to care for another species. Against the nightmarish landscape of the oil slick, she grounded her desire for a livable future in the figure of the hermit crab. “We had this makeshift lab, and we would collect about a thousand crabs a day,” she says. Caring for the hermit crabs involved edging Q-tips into their shells without injuring their delicate bodies. “I felt so comfortable cleaning the hermit crabs.” Bishop reminisced as we gazed at *Trespass* in her studio: “Swabbing with the Q-tip was the same gesture as painting, except I was taking oil off instead of applying it.” Her seasoned hand traced the intricate recesses of hermit crab shells, legs, and claws. Modest hopes for specific animals stirred with each of her concrete, repetitive, and meditative actions.

As her imagination wandered from the Hermit Crab Survival Project to the fallout of the BP oil flood, Bishop found that the ultimate environmental disaster of her nightmares was generating order-destroying dreaming.

The masses were starting to move. Out on the streets people were calling for BP executives to be jailed, agitating to disrupt the predictable flows of global capital. Out in the bayous and on the beaches, thousands of people were volunteering for the cleanup. The early years of the twenty-first century may have seemed like a moment when power relations were fixed in place, when nothing ever seemed to change. But this homogeneous, empty time was quickly giving way to a revolutionary time—a moment of political possibility when collective desires began to coalesce around multiple figures and future events.<sup>25</sup>

Hopes began to move like oil in water. Discrete droplets danced around on the surface of water as figures of desire moved about in the imagination of individual people. Bumping into one another, figural oil bubbles coalesced—becoming more perceptible, a glimmering sheen spreading through the sea of collective imagination. The potent toxicity of this shimmering liquid gathered together expansive desires, serving as a common object for anchoring diverse hopes. In a word, the oil spreading in the Gulf embodied the indeterminate nature of the *pharmakon*—a poisonous substance that can double as remedy, something that presents an obstacle or an opportunity.<sup>26</sup> The figurative power of oil in water provided an opening for a multitude who desired to cure the ills of extractive capitalism. The seemingly unstoppable flood of petrochemicals became a call for a collective response, spurring a swarm of creative agents into revolutionary action.<sup>27</sup>

## POLITICAL OPENINGS

The Multispecies Salon brought Jacqueline Bishop into conversation with other artists and anthropologists, as well as with natural scientists from multiple disciplines—a plankton biologist, an oceanographer, and a specialist on crabs' reproductive biology. During a public event at the Ironworks gallery, these moderately empowered intellectuals each offered alternative perspectives on the political and economic forces animating the official BP oil cleanup in the Gulf.<sup>28</sup> Collectively, they grappled with the challenges of understanding, representing, and responding to what President Barack Obama called “the worst environmental disaster in US history.”<sup>29</sup>

Matthias Elliott, then a graduate student in chemical oceanography at the University of South Florida, told us that business continued as usual for oil executives in the early weeks after the Deepwater Horizon explosion. They profited as hundreds of thousands of gallons of Corexit, the toxic “cure” for oil that ate the skin off Bishop's feet, were sprayed into the Gulf. “Look at

the board members of Nalco, the company that makes Corexit,” Elliott said. “They have close ties to BP and Exxon. The criminals are making money off cleaning up the crime scene. By using Corexit, they just swept the problem under the rug.” The only creatures who hypothetically stood to benefit wholly from the use of dispersants were oil-eating microbes whose predators had been killed by Corexit, according to Amy Lesen, a plankton biologist who teaches at Dillard University. “Even if oil-eating microbes exist,” she said, “there is not usually that much oil in the Gulf. A bloom of pollution-loving organisms could generate a massive perturbation of the system.”

While operating in a state of emergency, those in charge of mitigation strategies had lost sight of who and what was being protected. Still, certain animals were flourishing in the immediate aftermath of the oil flood. “Ironically, the blowout’s most powerful environmental effect seems to be both indirect and positive: the fishing closures,” wrote the marine biologist Carl Safina in November 2010. With the temporary ban on fishing, red snapper populations exploded. Marine biologists were finding three times as many fish when compared with the number before the blowout. But while the toxic specter hanging over the Gulf was good for certain species loved by humans, many others—namely, dolphins, pelicans, flying fish, oysters, *Sargassum* grass, crabs, Kemp’s ridley turtles, and shrimp—were not faring well.<sup>30</sup>

Effects of this disaster on unloved others—species largely beyond the political, economic, and affective calculus of most Americans—were less easy to understand and represent.<sup>31</sup> “It’s the sea turtles and pelicans that get all the press,” said Lesen, who is an expert on foraminifera, among the most common plankton species. At the Multispecies Salon, she was asked to talk generally about the impact of disaster on marine microbial ecology in the Gulf from her own foraminifera-centric perspective. But few studies of plankton were being conducted. With little up-to-date research to draw on, Lesen found that she had more to say in response to another question posed at the Salon: “Who is speaking for nature?” Lesen described silences shaped by oblique powers that thrust some “experts” into the spotlight. “The people who tend to be interviewed are people who are not very engaged in the research, people who work for government agencies,” she said, “and the people who work for government agencies have people behind them telling them what they should and shouldn’t say.” According to Lesen, “Our universities are funded by corporations. There is not a single university in Louisiana that is not funded by the oil industry—not one.”

Entrenched political and economic relationships may have dictated our early understandings of and responses to the oil flood, but the situation

quickly began to change. Government agents and corporate executives managing the response initially marched in lockstep through the homogeneous, empty time described by Walter Benjamin—a time when no significant events seemed to happen, when power was functioning predictably. Growing outrage from many segments of society in New Orleans opened up new horizons of political possibility.<sup>32</sup> Ro Mayer, a real estate agent and costume designer who exhibited work in the Multispecies Salon, told us about how she unexpectedly became swept up in the revolutionary momentum generated by the disaster:

On May 23, 2010, I was at Jazz Fest, and I could smell the oil in the air. My friends, we were all complaining to one another. Jazz Fest was sponsored by Shell Oil. We were all walking around going, ‘Ooh, ooh, this is really creepy. This could have been sponsored by BP. Then how would we feel about Jazz Fest?’ So we went home that night and were all complaining to one another on Facebook, and we thought we should be marching in the streets. . . . [T]here were a bunch of artists and costume designers in my particular group of friends, so we decided we should have a parade.

Mayer and her friends began planning a parade to mourn the loss of life in the BP disaster—including the lives of eleven human oil rig workers and those of countless individuals belonging to other animal, plant, and plankton species. The parade was a mock “jazz funeral”—a traditional New Orleans commemoration of the deceased that generates a “collective space for the reflection on the structures that impinge on inner-city lives,” in Helen Regis’s words.<sup>33</sup> Described as “determined partying when it really counts,” Mayer’s jazz funeral mourned the ending of life but also celebrated its passage into the next world. “In New Orleans, we don’t mourn like the rest of America,” stated a post on the Humid City blog. “We celebrate a life when it ends. It should be no surprise that we want to honor and celebrate the lives of our lost wildlife.”<sup>34</sup>

Mass mobilizations are often unexpected by everyone, even by their organizers.<sup>35</sup> When Mayer announced a funeral procession for Gulf wildlife by establishing a Facebook page, she was surprised as a small spark caught and set off a conflagration. “When you hit a nerve on Facebook, you’ve got these little green boxes that come up and say that someone has done something on your page,” Mayer told us during the panel discussion with other artists and academics at the Multispecies Salon. “If seven thousand of your friends do something in a week, your page looks like a slot machine paying off at Las Vegas. They line up the side, then they line up across, then they roll. The next thing you know, you’ve got a parade and a calling.”

As homogeneous, empty time quickly gave way to messianic time, Mayer created an empty virtual space, an opening for surprises beyond the reach of her own imaginative horizons.<sup>36</sup> “I didn’t have a goal when I started,” Mayer later told us. Chatting with her several months after she launched the initial Facebook page for the parade, we found the loquacious real estate agent struggling to articulate her personal dreams. Mayer said she did not want to pin any specific goals, or political agendas, to the parade she was planning. Her dreamscape contained mysterious possibilities that were unfigurable. Still, Mayer helped create an electronic architecture, a provisional opening that was quickly populated by the imagination of a multitude.

Some thinkers anticipate changes that will occur solely as a result of patient waiting. Mayer, however, saw that concrete action was necessary.<sup>37</sup> “I literally typed for two months almost around the clock until my fingers hurt, every day,” she told us. As oil vapors continued to waft through the city of New Orleans—mixing with the sweet pervasive smell of spring jasmine to create a pungent, sickening odor—hundreds of people began to RSVP via Facebook for the upcoming funeral procession. Collective outrage, and modest hopes, settled on this future event. Mayer became the drum major for a group she called the “Krewe of Dead Pelicans.”

On the day of the event, June 5, many people dressed according to the “Do-It-Yourself Parade Instructions” that Mayer had posted on the Facebook page: “Garb: wear a blue top and a black bottom for the most visual group impact. . . . Footwear: shrimp boots to show support for the marsh if you have got them. Otherwise black footwear is preferred. . . . Dead Pelican Umbrellas: bring your pelican (or other preferred critter) on a blue umbrella trimmed with black oil (plastic bags or fabric cut to resemble an oil spill and drips stapled to the umbrella points).” Others arrived in full-body handmade costumes representing Gulf Coast creatures—sea horses, turtles, crabs, and fantasy characters such as “the Pearly Oyster Queen.” A parody of Sarah Palin competed for attention with fat cats who were eating oil money and Dead Pelican sandwiches.

Mayer herself appeared in an ornate blue and black gown. Uniting the crowd behind a chant—“Stop the Oil, Save the Gulf”—she strode out front with a meticulously decorated pelican-adorned umbrella. Delegated participants carried a variety of props. A coffin containing a life-size human woman’s body represented the Gulf of Mexico. The US flag, hung upside down, was a symbol of mourning. A sea of “Katrina tarps”—the turquoise plastic issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) that covered the rooftops of post-Katrina New Orleans—depicted the ocean. The pro-



**FIGURE 1.8** Ro Mayer speaking to the Krewe of Dead Pelicans. Photograph by Maria Brodine. See [multispecies-salon.org/dead-pelicans](http://multispecies-salon.org/dead-pelicans).

cession was led by John Birdsong, a retired firefighter, and the Pair O'Dice Tumblers, a band that played a funeral dirge and led the crowd in the satirical chant, "Oh, it ain't my fault." Birdsong later said that the ironic chant was aimed at generating awareness of the crowd's own non-innocence—it was a response to finger pointing that pushed the blame elsewhere. He wanted protestors to think about how their lives and livelihoods were dependent on petroleum.

Against all outward appearances of being a rabble-rouser, Mayer herself emphasizes that the Krewe of Dead Pelicans tried to work "from within the system." Mayer, and others who helped her stage the funeral procession, certainly were complicit with and implicated in powerful institutions.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps as a result of this position within Louisiana society, the Krewe of Dead Pelicans became embroiled in conflicts at the neighborhood level that hinged on issues of race and class, historical divisions between "uptown" and "downtown" New Orleans, and competing visions for what ecological and social reconstruction in the region should entail. Even the chant "Stop the Oil, Save the Gulf" turned out to reflect deeper tensions with competing political projects.



FIGURE 1.9 The Oilflood protest. Photograph by Maria Brodine.

On May 30, a week before Mayer's first parade, another group called Oilflood rallied thousands behind the cry of "Fuck BP." The Oilflood organizers also wanted to march with Mayer, but she did not agree with their message. "They wanted to be in the Krewe of Dead Pelicans parade, and I told them they were welcome to come," she said. "They could march after the police, because I had a parade permit, and I had families. The police weren't going to put up with that, and I really didn't want . . . a confrontation with BP. I wanted to go through the channels."

Different slogans, and differences in tactics, bespoke deeper divergences in the orientation of the two groups. The Oilflood protest was not only orienting collective anger against a single institution, BP, but also highlighting the broader injustices of global capitalism. Ian Hoch, an activist and actor who played a minor role in the HBO series *Treme*, addressed the crowd at the Oilflood protest, saying, "I don't think it's accurate to say that BP is *the* enemy. It's my belief that in the early twenty-first century, corporations are going to cut corners whenever possible. If it means saving a dime, they are going to do the wrong thing."<sup>39</sup> Still, the visual landscape of the Oilflood protest was populated with graphics and satirical messages that played with the bright green and yellow BP logo. One group held signs with the phrase "Bitch, Please"

underneath a man with a gas nozzle pointed at another person's head like a gun—a visual citation of Eddie Adams's iconic photograph of a Vietcong guerrilla being executed. This image depicted the oil spill as a symptom of a conflict that had spun out of control. A hand-drawn black skull and crossbones, with green-BP-flower eyes, was featured on another sign—wet with dripping oil and emblazoned with the phrase “British Polluters.”

Reflecting on her actions, her refusal to confront BP directly and address the broader injustices of global capitalism, Mayer wonders whether she took the right course. “At the time, I thought that it was possible to go through the channels,” she says. “Maybe BP Oilflood was right. But at the time, we were the Miss Manners of protest parades, and I was trying to hold that line.” In refusing to link up with initiatives to shut down BP, perhaps Mayer was also resisting attempts to make the demands of her emergent group too concrete—to preserve the group as a heterogeneous, still somewhat unformed association, a gathering together of people who felt powerless in the face of a monumental environmental disaster.<sup>40</sup> Despite these local attempts to avoid a certain misplaced concreteness, in the minds of many people around the country BP became a figure that embodied all of the ills of global capitalism and the urgent situation in the Gulf. Against the backdrop of broader imaginative horizons, collective outrage came to be focused on the company.<sup>41</sup>

Figures can serve as anchoring points for collaborative action. Gathering together collective hopes or feelings of outrage, figures can generate concrete victories in the world. As the will of millions bore down on BP, a moment of political possibility emerged. The existence of the company itself was endangered by the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Amid actions on the streets of New Orleans in early June 2010, and solidarity actions in many other cities around the United States, President Barack Obama began to level very public pressure on the company. BP executives emerged from a meeting with the president on June 16, 2010, and told reporters assembled on the White House lawn about a new solution. A \$20 billion fund would be created by BP to pay damage claims from the disaster. The fund was a rough approximation of the company's annual profits, which were \$17 billion in 2009. “For the president and the Gulf this deal was a ‘stunning coup,’” according to Carl Safina, a marine biologist who wrote a book about the disaster, *A Sea in Flames*.<sup>42</sup>

When concrete objects of desire emerge in the historical present, when specific things we hope for materialize from our broader imaginative horizons, these moments of arrival often contain disappointment. The \$20 billion payout failed to address the concerns of Mayer and a multitude of angered New Orleans residents. As BP and US government agents continued to

use the same tactics to respond to the mounting disaster—as they continued to spray Corexit, as they failed to plug the blowout, as the oil continued to flow into the Gulf—protests emerged on the streets of New Orleans with renewed vigor. Mayer’s Facebook group was only one hub of activity in a polycentric matrix of revolutionary imagining. Even as collective outrage generated concrete victories in the historical present—punishing BP by driving down the price of its stock and extracting a huge payout of money—the collective imagination of people who had been stirred to action searched future horizons for new figures of hope.

As petrochemicals flooded into the Gulf unabated, Mayer continued to organize funeral processions for wildlife, leading people behind the slogan “Stop the Oil, Save the Gulf.” As weeks turned into months, the force of the Krewe of Dead Pelicans’ street pageantry began to fade. Collective hopes of people who cared about the Gulf coalesced around a single future event: the plugging of BP’s Macondo oil well. Yet when this event arrived—when Admiral Thad Allen announced that the “well is effectively dead” on September 19, 2010—anxiety and dread about the Gulf lingered in the air.

Collective dreams in New Orleans began to scatter. Hope continued to move like oil in water, but with dispersants added to the mix. If collective desires coalesced like droplets of oil during the early weeks of the flood, gathering crowds together at specific events, hopes were becoming more elusive, less perceptible. As a toxic specter haunted the aqueous landscape of the Gulf, the movements of oil became more mysterious. It embodied another principle of the *pharmakon*, which “defines no fixed point of reference,” according to Isabelle Stengers.<sup>43</sup> It proved difficult to recognize and understand its effects with assurance. These pharmacological properties of oil dispersed in water endowed it with even more figural potency.

“It’s not going to be over in our lifetime,” Mayer told us in September 2010. “Oil is still washing up. Corexit has sunk in the water column, it’s dissolved. It’s going to be in the food chain. It’s going to be a health issue. It’s going to be a seafood issue. It’s going to be a climate issue. I mean, I know enough to know I ain’t wrong.” But as news of the oil disappeared from the front pages of newspapers, as people scrambled to get their share of the \$20 billion payout, protestors stopped showing up to the Krewe of Dead Pelicans marches. Street theater no longer seemed capable of remedying the long-term ecological consequences of the disaster.

The revolutionary spirit animating the people of New Orleans began to flit away, seeking out new sites and figures. The scale of the BP oil flood seemed too monumental for many people, the disaster in the Gulf began to

seem hopeless. More ambitious activists stepped back from images of the wreckage to rethink the scope and the scale of their future interventions. Mayer began to notice postings on her Facebook page by people she started calling the “Green Tea Party”—activists from an unformed heterogeneous collection of Green Party affiliates who were starting to imagine a broad-based populist alternative to the Tea Party of the right. Outrage over the irreparable damage to the Gulf began to fuel organizing at a larger scale. The lingering pharmacological power of oil in water became a force animating national political imaginaries. Almost exactly one year after Admiral Thad Allen announced that the well was “effectively dead,” the vanguard of the Occupy Wall Street movement staged their first interventions in Manhattan. Amid ambitious imaginings about reconfiguring the modern world system, as people began to dream of interrupting business as usual, we found artists quietly turning to post-human figures of hope on the margins of the Multi-species Salon.

## HOPE AFTER THE ANTHROPOCENE

Departing from the blasted landscapes of the historical present—marine ecosystems awash in toxic petrochemicals, cities destroyed by erratic weather patterns, and cultural landscapes blasted by capital—hope is emerging as artists and scientists speculate about the distant future, looking ahead through geological time. “It depends on the time horizon that you are looking at,” said Amy Lesen with respect to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. “If we are looking at now, when people on the Gulf have to eat and make a living, this is a total disaster. If you value what is going to happen in the next twenty, thirty, fifty, one hundred years, then there is something to be concerned about. But, if you’re talking about a two million year time horizon in the Gulf, sure, everything is going to be fine eventually.”<sup>44</sup>

Amid revelry in the wreckage of natural and fiscal catastrophes at the Multi-species Salon exhibit, many visitors failed to notice an unassuming wooden box resting on the floor of the Ironworks. This box, Bryan Wilson’s *Monument to the Future*, contained a dark vision of a time when “everything is going to be fine” for certain species, even if human life has ceased to exist. A field of cratered black glass is housed in the box. Devoid of all plant and animal life, the miniature scene prefigures a possible future after nuclear winter. At first glance, this landscape blasted by nuclear warheads appears to be bleak and desolate. More careful attention reveals that the imagined desert wasteland could be a place where barely perceptible creatures will flourish. Even in the



**FIGURE 1.10** Bryan Wilson, *Monument to the Future (Specimen 1)*, cast and carved glass within a wooden box (2010). Photograph by Eben Kirksey. See [multispecies-salon.org/wilson](https://multispecies-salon.org/wilson).

aftermath of a global anthropogenic disaster, even if we humans have killed ourselves, Wilson reasons, other forms of life will outlive us. “This is a blank Petri dish,” says Wilson. “Microbial life will survive and thrive after humans have made the Earth uninhabitable for the life forms we love.”<sup>45</sup>

Wilson’s artwork offers a point of entry into the lifework of Penelope Boston, a microbiologist at New Mexico Tech who specializes in extremophiles—microbes that thrive in extreme cold, dryness, heat, pressure, radiation, or vacuums. Following lines of flight from Wilson’s imaginings about possible futures, we became captivated by Boston’s research while attending a conference in Amherst, Massachusetts, honoring the biologist Lynn Margulis’s life. Early in her career, Boston wrote a series of reports for the United

Nations about the environmental consequences of nuclear war. She found that many different kinds of microbes can thrive in radioactive landscapes. Some animals—such as certain species of nematode worms and tardigrades, small eight-legged arthropods popularly known as “water bears”—also were likely to live through nuclear war. “After major catastrophic events, like the eruption of Mount Saint Helens,” Boston told us, “we have all been surprised about how quickly these disaster zones have been colonized by new organisms.”

Boston’s latest research involves the study of microbial communities in caves. It is well known that microbes are ubiquitous underground in low-temperature environments, but she began to surprise her colleagues as she started finding even higher microbial biodiversity in deeper and hotter caves. A “geological genome bank” is trapped underground, in Boston’s words. She has discovered bubbles of air inside huge calcium sulfate crystals, inside extremely hot and abyssal caves, with living microbes inside. “Time capsules have been entombed in rocks for millions of years,” she told us. “These microbes are the living dead. They have likely reintroduced their banked genes to the surface micro-biosphere many times in the Earth’s history.”

The blasted landscape memorialized in Wilson’s work offers an opening to think about the life-forms that will flourish in the aftermath of apocalyptic disasters for humans. Wilson’s cratered wasteland, imagined to be ripe for colonization by the extremophiles studied by Boston, offers us a vision of a future that, in his words, “is only a possibility.” While “the scales are tipping from the possible to the probable,” in Wilson’s mind, this future is conditional, not inevitable.<sup>46</sup> At the intersection of dread and hope, Wilson sees the potential of tiny actions—like Jacqueline Bishop’s gestures of care toward hermit crabs—to make the world a more livable place. Against the bleak backdrop of this possible future, where concrete hopes for life on Earth can be grounded only in tenacious microorganisms, he regards the historical present as a moment that is ripe with open-ended biocultural possibilities.

The blasted landscape created by Bryan Wilson and his imagining of future possibilities stand in sharp contrast to Derrida’s writings about hope. Derrida regarded the future as an “abyssal desert.” Rather than dream about the terrifying specter of a literal desert landscape on future horizons, Derrida suggests that we should literally expect the unexpected by waiting for mysterious possibilities that are beyond our imaginative horizons.<sup>47</sup> The empty desert in Derrida’s writings is devoid of all figures, empty of any objects of desire. Rather than pinning hope on something concrete, his dreams are “without content.”<sup>48</sup> Waiting in a bleak desert—refusing to affix his desires

to specific programs of action, events, or political projects—Derrida would have us cultivate expectations that are literally empty.<sup>49</sup>

Waiting for nothing in particular resigns the future to fate.<sup>50</sup> Contentless messianicity, Derrida's empty promise, goes nowhere.<sup>51</sup> Rather than wait in an empty imaginative desert, rather than evacuate all content from our dreams in the face of large-scale disasters, we found intellectual allies in artists who were illuminating lively figures of hope. We found a hopeful spirit playing at the limits of their imaginative horizons, moving like oil in water, searching for figures around which it might coalesce. Prefiguring livable futures, and quickly refiguring possibilities amid changing contingencies, thinkers and tinkerers in biocultural worlds were generating surprising becomings. Against the backdrop of the bleak future imagined by Wilson, we found hopes being generated by people, living beings, and other agents already in our midst.<sup>52</sup>

## HOPE FOR WHOM?

Amid imaginings of catastrophic possible futures, competing dreams and schemes played out at the Multispecies Salon in detritus from disasters in the recent past. In the opening pages of *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein sketches the free-market dream worlds that emerged in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>53</sup> Imagined as a blank slate, a tabula rasa, the city became an ideal site for implementing policies of privatization during a moment of profound crisis. The storm became an open invitation to experiment with the traumatized local economy—to shut down public housing, to privatize public schools, to suddenly implement a host of plans for remaking society. Amid the visions of a new world, of clean breaks and blank slates, the rubble-lined streets betrayed a different, gritty reality. The ruins of New Orleans, a place that has long been styled as “the City That Care Forgot,” became habitat for multiple other species. Mold burrowed deeply into the frames of houses. Cat's claw, a rapidly climbing vine with yellow spring flowers, netted picturesque architecture, digging into roof shingles and wood siding and claiming blighted buildings as their own.<sup>54</sup>

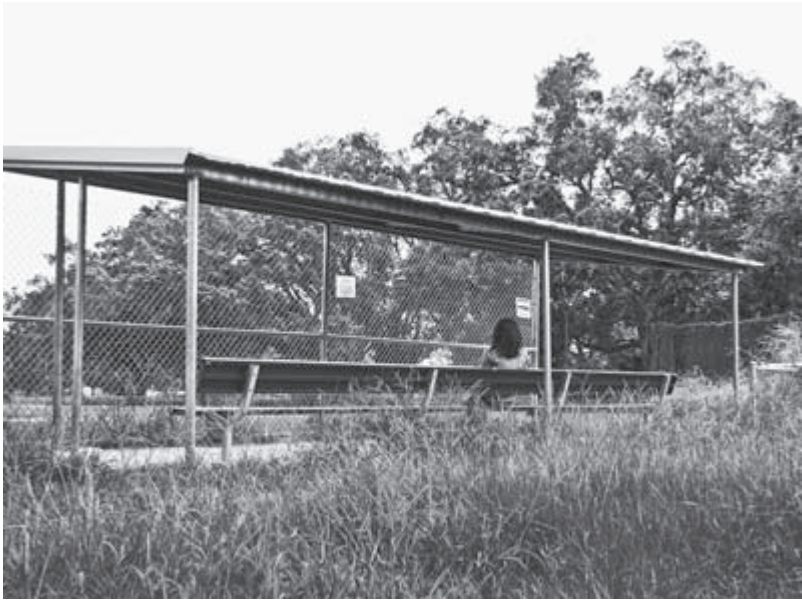
While city planners fantasized about a clean opening in the aftermath of this disaster, and tenacious forms of life proliferated, young artists at the other end of the American political spectrum began flocking to New Orleans after the storm.<sup>55</sup> White folks in their mid-twenties and thirties, many recent college graduates, reveled in the wreckage. Settling in neighborhoods that previously had been largely African American, these newcomers began to

remake local cultural geographies. The Multispecies Salon took place in the Saint Claude Arts District, an emerging zone along a main thoroughfare connecting the French Quarter with the Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhoods along Saint Claude Avenue became contact zones where recent migrants were living alongside longtime residents.<sup>56</sup> Finding hope in the neglected city, many artists inhabiting the underground art world of Saint Claude began exploring the possibilities contained in decomposition, decline, and deterioration. “New Orleans wasn’t on the same grid of power as Boston, where I was living,” one recent transplant said at a backyard barbecue. “In the decay there was possibility.” Thriving—or, at least, surviving—in the detritus of a collapsing system, Saint Claude artists were celebrating the aesthetics of blight.<sup>57</sup>

While many of the hipsters and crust punks who animated the emergent Saint Claude Arts District imagined themselves as living outside capitalism, they were also figuring into the schemes of New Orleans city planners and real estate speculators. Recently arrived white youth were finding hope at the intersection of multiple worlds, harboring dreams that were not entirely their own. The Arts District was helping transform poor neighborhoods into up-and-coming, fashionable places. Plans for a streetcar that would bring tourists from the French Quarter to Saint Claude promised to bring income to neighborhood businesses. At a lavish dinner party thrown for the curators of the Multispecies Salon by a local patron of the arts, where the themes of the exhibit were the subject of spirited conversation, the wife of a local real estate magnate enthusiastically proclaimed, “You all are bringing hope to blasted landscapes.”

The hopes that real estate agents were finding in the emerging Saint Claude Arts District presented both opportunities and problems for locals with deeper roots. Many tensions, fractures along lines of race and class, underlay the reimagining of the neighborhood as a space for arts revitalization. “As soon as I saw the Saint Claude Arts District start to bloom, I was supportive, but I also had my reservations,” said José Torres-Tama, a performance artist and homeowner in the Saint Claude area. “There could be a potentially brutal gentrification process developing here over the next five years, one that excludes many of the current residents of color.” Skyrocketing property taxes were already hitting longtime residents hard, prompting many to move. “I am supportive of the streetcar, but I’m not interested in making money off the raised property values and flipping my house. Where would I go? I want to see an integrated arts community here.”<sup>58</sup>

Temporary alliances with hegemonic institutions and external funding



**FIGURES 1.11–1.12** Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Bench and Workshop*, photographs, 2010. Courtesy of the artist. See [multispecies-salon.org/acevedo](http://multispecies-salon.org/acevedo).

sources enabled the curators of the Multispecies Salon to explore the contours of hope in a social landscape structured by social inequality. Making practical engagements and staging tactical provocations, the curators—who were all recent migrants to the city or temporary interlopers from New York City and San Francisco—worked with longtime residents and newcomers on issues of common concern. Exposing, subverting, and rearticulating dominant regimes for managing life, they identified common interests among humans and other species, engaging with members of other social worlds and neighboring ecological communities.<sup>59</sup> In a situation of seeming hopelessness—as a definitive solution to the ongoing ecological disaster in the Gulf was beyond reach, as images of apocalypse and decay proliferated—the curators illustrated very personal and somewhat peculiar visions of bio-cultural hope.

Key members of the curatorial team that brought the Multispecies Salon to New Orleans—Nina Nichols and Amy Jenkins—used happenings in the gallery as an opportunity to show off Molly, Bunny, and Sylvie, three prized goats who lived on an urban farm, the Pretty Doe Dairy. While the goats gnashed at plants springing up between askew sidewalk slabs, Nichols told us about how the animals were involved in what she called “a guerrilla bio-remediation scheme.” When not on display in art galleries, the goats were living on vacant lots surrounding her house in the Saint Roch neighborhood, where they were slowly clearing blighted properties of poison ivy. The goats not only transformed the neighborhood’s overgrowth and refuse into milk, but, according to Nichols, they were helping humans inhabit an otherwise inhospitable landscape. After goats eat poison ivy, their milk has a prophylactic effect against the noxious plant, she claims. “If you drink the milk, or eat the cheese we make, you simply won’t have a problem with poison ivy.”<sup>60</sup>

By twisting a poison into a cure, the Pretty Doe Dairy was playing with the alchemy of hope. Rather than uncritically celebrating the aesthetics of decay, Nichols and Jenkins used unloved plants to sustain lovable life forms. As a riotous diversity of weedy plant life proliferated in New Orleans alongside laissez-faire dream worlds, as cat’s claw claimed buildings and poison ivy made people wary of wandering through blighted lots, they generated new urban lifeways. Making life and death cuts in entangled ecological worlds, distinguishing enemy species from allies, they were thriving in alliance with others in a zone of abandon. While other artists in the Multispecies Salon searched their imaginative horizons for elusive possibilities, this pair of urban farmers grounded modest hopes in living figures—individual animals capable of living in neglected places.



**FIGURE 1.13** Pretty Doe Dairy logo. Courtesy of the Black Forest Fancies. See [multispecies-salon.org/prettydoedairy](http://multispecies-salon.org/prettydoedairy).

Caring for actual beings—attending to the interests and needs of Molly, Bunny, and Sylvie—offered an opportunity to form alliances with other people who were deeply rooted in the local environs. Negotiating access to parcels of land owned by the city, at least on paper, meant entering into dialogue with neighbors. Grazing in abandoned properties became an opportunity to hear about histories of landownership, to learn about past agricultural ventures in the neighborhood, to explore new ways to live together in the present and the future. While feeding their goats, Nichols and Jenkins were able to save at least one elderly neighbor's property from being designated “blighted,” a status that generates a hefty monthly fine from the city. With tax bills mounting, the added burden of being blighted was pushing many longtime property owners over the edge—to the brink of foreclosure.<sup>61</sup>

Nichols and Jenkins began to develop a more ambitious vision for the Pretty Doe Dairy—not just to use overgrown lots as pasture for their animals, but also to start cultivating plants that humans love. They began working with their landowning neighbors to help keep property out of the cycle of foreclosure and real estate speculation. Toiling alongside their goats in the weeds, Nichols and Jenkins quickly discovered that starting community gardens would demand sustained work—more of a commitment than they could personally manage. While hauling trash from yards that had been used as dumpsites, they also discovered diverse artifacts—among them, a headless doll, a piggy bank, an alligator skeleton, and an automatic pistol. Reanimating these forgotten relics, they took their visions for forming community gardens to the people of New Orleans in a mule-drawn carriage made out of



**FIGURE 1.14** Ichabod, a baby goat born during the Pretty Doe Dairy project, was sold to a farm near New Orleans where he was slaughtered for meat. Amy Jenkins (left) and Nina Nichols (holding Ichabod) made lattes and cheese with milk from the pretty doe goat who gave birth to this baby. The Edible Companions exhibit at the Multispecies Salon was curated by Jenkins and Nichols, who brought their goats to the Front Gallery on St. Claude Avenue alongside live kombucha mothers, insect shish kebabs, and meat from nutria caught in the wilds of Louisiana. Photograph courtesy of the Black Forest Fancies. See [multispecies-salon.org/prettydoedairy](http://multispecies-salon.org/prettydoedairy).

tin roofing, wood scraps, and theater curtains—an aboveground Subterranean Museum. Tessa Farmer, a British artist, fashioned tiny webbed demons for the project. Dana Sherwood, a prominent member of ecoart networks in New York City, created theatrical maquettes to tell stories about New Orleans in conversation with fantasy and local legend. In Nichols’s words, the mobile museum brought together “mystical local history, secrets of the soil, and community participation” (see plates 1–2).

By touring her neighborhood with the Subterranean Museum and giving talks at local elementary schools, Nichols helped generate a community to sustain her garden initiative. Exposing and destabilizing failed government initiatives for managing biological life in zones of abandon, she imparted a sense of pleasure of being in the world with multiple other species.<sup>62</sup> Deploying “low to no maintenance agricultural techniques,” she began gardening with neighbors who had very limited resources for fresh food. While working hard in the historical present—building and sustaining alliances with people and multiple species—the playful dimensions of her project remained open to surprises from the mysterious beyond.<sup>63</sup> Figures of demons played with goats and soil microbes in Nichols’s imagination, animating dreams about possible futures to come.

## ENDINGS/BEGINNINGS

Flickering specters from another dimension, the future, haunted the Multispecies Salon. Ghosts from the past also lurked on the margins. Affirming an unpredictable future to come, or even of a past to come again, the artists who animated the Salon thus harbored emancipatory desires kindred to those celebrated by Derrida.<sup>64</sup> The promise of the messianic is spectral, for Derrida, in contrast to the apocalyptic which “announces the end of spectrality.”<sup>65</sup> Amid hauntings by figural demons and toxic specters, we found intellectuals in New Orleans who were joining Derrida in pushing past the definitive endings that underpin apocalyptic thought, but were also parting ways with him in understanding the spectral promises of messianic beginnings.

Artists who gravitated to the Multispecies Salon claimed the promise of the messianic by grounding their hopes in living figures and enlivening specific places. These tinkerers found hope in blasted landscapes by twining their dreams with particular plots of land, specific neighborhoods, and small stretches of coastline. Being present with significant others in the world—learning to live with goats, hermit crabs, and multiple other species—artists forged connections with the native soil and shorelines of the City That Care

Forgot. Avoiding these sorts of attachments, the spirit of Derrida's thought instead dances alone in an imaginative desert.<sup>66</sup> Derrida is infamous in animal studies circles for standing naked in front of his cat, incapable of responding to and having regard for an actual animal. Rather than follow this philosopher, we instead cast our lot with thinkers who have articulated tangible political positions and forged concrete proposals for novel ways of being with others.<sup>67</sup>

Working uneasy alchemy with the messianic spirit, visionaries transformed toxic substances into cures; they changed figures of apocalyptic endings into signs heralding new beginnings.<sup>68</sup> Rather than join Derrida in hoping for nothing in particular, rather than literally expecting the unexpected, organic intellectuals who swarmed to the Multispecies Salon used figuration to animate the field of biocultural possibility. With hopes moving like oil in water, with desires congealing around specific figures and then dancing away, these thinkers generated lively coalescences. Forging concrete alliances among social and environmental worlds in the historical present, caring for other beings and things, these creative agents also generated openings for more audacious hopes.

## NOTES

To account for our collective labor in the authorship of this essay, as we noted in the introduction to this volume, we played with the instructions given to authors by the journal *Science* to tally up percentage points to affirm that each author “has participated significantly in the reported research or writing.” In our creative accounting, we refuse to make all the math add up to 100 percent. All three of us participated in 40 percent of the “data acquisition,” since we attended a number of key interviews together ( $3 \times 40\% = 120\%$ ). Eben Kirksey designed the experiment. Nicholas Shapiro conducted interviews with artists, was a participant observer at the Pretty Doe Dairy, and is an ethnographer of punk gentrification and local perceptions of toxicity. Embedded as a participant observer with the Krewe of Dead Pelicans, both in virtual mediascapes and marching in the streets, Maria Brodine took the lead in the fieldwork for the “Political Openings” section of this chapter. She also curated the companion art exhibit “Art Spill.” Kirksey created an “ethnographic para-site” in the Ironworks gallery involving conversations with the artist Jacqueline Bishop and a number of biologists. Following the hermit crabs to Grand Isle, following the goats to abandoned lots in the Saint Roch neighborhood, and following the figure of hopeful microbes, Kirksey also conducted a multisited ethnography orbiting around multiple species. We shared the work of drafting and revising the manuscript equally. Shapiro and Brodine took the lead in transcribing interviews and interpreting emic cultural elements from New Orleans. Kirksey took the lead in

interpreting the results with etic ideas poached from Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, and his own earlier writings on hope: see Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*. An earlier version of this chapter in a different form appeared as S. Eben Kirksey, Maria Brodine, and Nicholas Shapiro, “Hope in Blasted Landscapes,” *Social Science Information* 52, no. 2 (2013): 228–56.

1. Marcus, *Para-Sites*, 5.

2. “The government doesn’t watch. The industry is self-regulating,” said David Sullivan when we asked about the title of the digital animations he exhibited at the Ironworks. “Fugitive emissions” is a technical term for leaks from refineries or other irregularities that are not expected. Ironically, the industry’s own language also implies that the refineries are renegade criminals, elusive and on the run. Sullivan has focused on refineries in light of the lack of federal oversight. Keeping track of ephemeral toxic belches, he suggests, should be done not just with technical testing equipment but also with dark images of the emissions and their manifold effects. Microscopic toxins are magnified and occasionally stutter across the screen. Chemical compounds morph into tumors. A dark object, perhaps a blackened lung or a dying plant root, drifts in and out of focus as Sullivan brings together multiple scales and spaces.

3. Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, a meticulous illustrator of mutant bugs committed to strict principles of realism, says that she “loses herself in the animal” when she is outside collecting insects, in fields, at roadsides, and at the forest edge. Hugh Raffles reports that Hesse-Honegger feels “very connected, extremely connected,” a deep bond, as if, perhaps, she had once been such a creature—a leaf bug—and had a body remembering.” Gradually accumulating evidence of disfigurements rendered by uncontainable radioactive isotopes, Hesse-Honegger’s illustrations are figures of growing and expansive disaster: see Raffles, *The Illustrated Insectopedia*, 13.

4. “From a millenarian perspective, things are always getting worse,” writes Donna Haraway. “Oddly, belief in advancing disaster is actually part of a trust in salvation, whether deliverance is expected by sacred or profane revelations, through revolution, dramatic scientific breakthroughs, or religious rapture”: Haraway, *Modest \_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse*, 41.

5. Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008 worked to embody the messianic spirit, rallying the masses behind hope and quoting Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous plea about “the fierce urgency of now.” In the words of John Hartigan, Obama promised to close the gap between the imagined and possible future real: Hartigan, “Millennials for Obama and the Messy Antic Ends of Race,” 7. See also Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 207.

6. Bregje van Eekelen and colleagues have written a pamphlet full of other words that bulldoze over our dreams: see van Eekelen et al., *Shock and Awe*, 1.

7. Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy*, 48.

8. Our approach in this essay is similar to that in Sara Ahmed’s study of happiness. The question guiding her book is not so much “What is happiness?” as “What does happiness do?”: Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 2.

9. Raymond Williams explores the differences between a willed general trans-

formation and a technological transformation in his classic article “Utopia and Science Fiction.” In the case of this oil spill, a technological accident led to a profound transformation of ecological and social communities. This event catalyzed a multitude of creative human agents, who began to will a general transformation of political, economic, and ecological relationships.

10. Haraway has argued that we are all chimeras—products of technological, linguistic, cultural, political, and biological fusions. “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time,” she writes, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs”: Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 150. The chimera—a fabled fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail—also has served as a way for biologists to think about how tissues of genetically different individuals coexist as a result of grafting or an analogous process in nature: see also Haraway, *When Species Meet* 304, n3.

11. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

12. Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 234n40.

13. “A coalescence is a historical force that derives from an unexpected connection”: Tsing and Pollman, “Global Futures,” 109.

14. Reviewing Derrida’s work, the acclaimed literary critic Fredric Jameson writes, “We ought to be able to distinguish an apocalyptic politics from a messianic one, and which might lead us on into some new way of sorting out the Left from the Right, the new International in Marx’s spirit from that in the world of business and state power”: Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 63–64.

15. Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” 253.

16. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 74.

17. Derrida and de Cauter, “For a Justice to Come,” 24–25; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 167.

18. Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” 253; emphasis added.

19. Derrida also regards messianicity “as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design”: Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28, 74.

20. Lowe, “Viral Clouds,” 525.

21. Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy*, 117.

22. These prisoners and the other cleanup workers were almost exclusively African American men in a region where nine out of ten residents are white: Young, “BP Hires Prison Labor.” They were paid low wages and exposed to chemical toxins.

23. Drawing attention to the badly defined organizational milieu that channels toxic waste through particular life cycles, Brian Wynne suggests that naively simple models of risk often eclipse insuperable indeterminacies. The destination of all of the “waste” collected from the beaches of Grand Isle, including the living hermit crabs, was a closely guarded secret: Wynne, “The Toxic Waste Trade,” 123–24.

24. Rose and van Dooren, “Unloved Others,” 3.

25. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261; Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 32.

26. The material properties of crude oil embody the ambivalences of the pharmakon. Classically, the pharmakon is any drug whose therapeutic effect can suddenly shift to its deadly opposite—depending on the dose, the circumstances, or the

context. The pharmakon “defines no fixed point of reference that would allow us to recognize and understand its effects with some assurance”: Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, 29. Is oil the source of power or an irredeemable poison? Is it a panacea that cures all ills or a pervasive toxin that is generating a plague of cancers and industrial disasters?

27. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 57.

28. Marcus, *Para-Sites*, 5.

29. Alan Silverleib, “The Gulf Spill: America’s Worst Environmental Disaster?” August 10, 2010, 11:09am EDT. Available online: <http://www.cnn.com>, accessed February 24, 2014.

30. Safina, *A Sea in Flames*, 287–88, 256, 284–85.

31. Rose and van Dooren, “Unloved Others.”

32. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261; Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 220.

33. The jazz funeral’s cultural cousin, second-line parades, are moving block parties with brass bands that are convened on annual dates by more than fifty black benevolent societies on Sunday afternoons from August to April. A second line is a “dynamic participatory event in which there is no distinction between audience and performer,” writes Helen Regis. These events seek to “actualize the values of participants: respect, fiscal power, order, solidarity, peace, community uplift and beauty”: Regis, “Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line,” 755. When jazz funerals grow large enough to evoke wide-ranging participation—as was the goal of the Krewe of Dead Pelicans—the distinction between the two celebratory staples of New Orleans erodes. Both second lines and jazz funerals have long been appropriated as vehicles for an array of agendas, from HIV awareness to promoting the launch of an Anne Rice novel.

34. “Krewe of Dead Pelicans and the Tar Ball,” blog post, 2010, accessed March 8, 2013, <http://nola.humidbeings.com>.

35. Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 62.

36. Vincent Crapanzano suggests that we can take pleasure in the unreality of imaginary hinterlands—the possibilities and the play it facilitates: Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, 100–102.

37. Peter Worsley, who studied messianic movements in New Guinea in the aftermath of the Second World War, distinguished “movements which anticipate that the millennium will occur solely as a result of supernatural intervention, and those which envisage that the action of human beings will be necessary”: Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 12.

38. Marcus, *Para-Sites*, 5.

39. Certainly, Hoch, with his work in the entertainment industry, was not an “innocent.” Like Mayer and the protestors who were hailed with the satirical chant, “Oh, it ain’t my fault,” Hoch was deeply implicated in the economic and political structures he was critiquing. A video of his speech, which was delivered on May 30, 2010, is available online as “Ian Hoch at BP Oil Flood Protest,” accessed January 13, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com>.

40. Here we are writing in conversation with Derrida, who celebrates social movements that are “heterogeneous, still somewhat unformed, [and] full of con-

traditions, but that gather together the weak of the earth, all those who feel themselves crushed by the economic hegemonies": Derrida and de Cauter, "For a Justice to Come," accessed January 13, 2013, <http://archive.indymedia.be>.

41. Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, 2.

42. Safina, *A Sea in Flames*, 168.

43. Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, 29.

44. Competing modes of narrative emplotment, to borrow a phrase from Hayden White, are at play in these accounts of the Deepwater Horizon disaster: White, *Figural Realism*, 9. This tragic human folly, which destroyed communities of people and multiple other species, will become a comedy in the long run in which everything will turn out all right for the Gulf ecosystem, according to Lesen. William Cronon used a similar strategy of narrative juxtaposition to account for the historiography of the Dust Bowl. Some historians emphasized the hopeful dimensions of this environmental catastrophe—for example, "Nature made a mess, and human beings cleaned it up," becoming "builders for tomorrow": Cronon, "A Place for Stories," 1348. Others historians suggest that the story of the Dust Bowl is about the failures of human beings to accommodate themselves to nature, not about the failures of nature.

45. Unloved others, those who are disregarded by humans, may well survive mass extinction events on future horizons: see Rose and van Dooren, "Unloved Others."

46. Harding, "Get Religion," 361.

47. Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, 103–4, 146; Derrida, "Marx and Sons," 253. See also the discussion in Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 44.

48. Derrida and de Cauter, "For a Justice to Come," 24–25; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 167.

49. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28.

50. Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 53.

51. Derrida tried to protect the notion of messianicity without messianism from the tools of deconstruction that he helped create with his early work. If the messianic spirit is emptied of all content, Derrida reasons, then it remains "undeconstructible"—it cannot be taken apart. "The figures of messianism would have to be . . . deconstructed as 'religious,' ideological, or fetishistic formations," he writes, "whereas messianicity without messianism remains, for its part, undeconstructible, like justice": Derrida, "Marx and Sons," 253.

52. Notions of care, ethical responsibility, and rescue are classical symptoms of American imperialist optimism and can-do frontierism that engendered many of the "blasted landscapes" described in this book. Leo Marx describes a similar dynamics on the frontiers of nineteenth-century America. "The swelling, surging demand for everything that technology promises" is coupled with nostalgic sentiments in an "ambivalent, look-both-ways kind of native progressivism": Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 220.

53. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.

54. Doreen Piano describes packs of abandoned dogs roaming the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans. Out-of-towners, primarily men—manual laborers, con-

tractors, and white-collar professionals—descended on the city, camping out in abandoned parking lots: Piano, “Working the Streets of Post-Katrina New Orleans,” 201.

55. Lauren Berlant has written about attachment to unattainable fantasies of living “the good life.” Dreams of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lasting intimacy, she argues, are “scenes of conventional desire that stand manifestly in the way of the subject’s thriving”: Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 16, 45. These fantasies were part of the dreamscape in post-Katrina New Orleans. Affects and emotional attachments bind humans to other beings in the present, while desires oriented toward elusive objects of hope on the horizon also proliferated.

56. James Clifford has described museums as contact zones. The notion of a “contact zone” as first developed by Mary Louise Pratt in the context of European colonialism was extended by Clifford “to include cultural relations within the same state, region, or city—in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic. For most inhabitants of a poor neighborhood, located perhaps just blocks or a short bus ride from a fine arts museum, the museum might as well be on another continent. Contact perspectives recognize that ‘natural’ social distances and segregations are historical/political products: apartheid was a relationship”: Clifford, *Routes*, 204; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 4.

57. Elizabeth Acevedo was attracted back to her hometown of New Orleans—after spending the early years of her adult life in San Francisco, Paris, New York, and Charlottesville—by ties with family and friends but also by a place that felt complicated and more real. Her Disconnect Series depicts sites that were neglected in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, such as the public baseball field in *The Bench* and the overgrown and boarded-up structure in *Workshop*. Rather than feeling hope in a blasted landscape, Acevedo is haunted by anxiety—about the possibility of dispersants in the shrimp she eats, about fresh reports of floods in the Mississippi watershed and the release of water in spillways, about the possibility of another hurricane. The future contains uncertainties and unknowns.

58. These quotes are from José Torres-Tama’s interview with Pelican Bomb, an online platform dedicated to the growing Louisiana arts community: “State of Affairs: José Torres-Tama,” August 31, 2011, accessed January 13, 2013, <http://pelican-bomb.com>.

59. See da Costa and Philip, *Tactical Biopolitics*, xviii.

60. A peer-reviewed experiment found that dairy goats that eat poison oak do not pass detectable amounts of the plant’s principal toxins in their milk or urine: see Kouakou et al., “Initial Research Indicates Dairy Goats Used to Clear Poison Oak Do Not Transfer Toxicant to Milk,” 4. We could not locate any studies of goat milk acting as a prophylactic against poison ivy.

61. If British imperialism was “a campaign to extend an ecological regime: a way of living on Nature,” related campaigns were taking place within the municipality of New Orleans. Official codes governing how one ought to live with nature were perpetuating a homogeneous ecological regime that attempted to limit the riotous diversity of plant life: see Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 229.

62. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 240.

63. Elsewhere, Kirksey has explored the interplay of hard work and expansive dreams. “Imaginative dreams bring surprising prospects into view when translated into collaborative action”: Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 1.

64. Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” 253.

65. “The messianic is spectral,” Jameson writes. “It is the spectrality of the future, the other dimension, that answers to the haunting spectrality of the past which is historicity itself. The apocalyptic, however, announces the end of spectrality”: Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 63–64.

66. Evading concreteness, Derrida refuses to connect spectrality with “the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general.” Rebuking constructions he identifies as *ontologies*—a linking of “present-being [*on*]” with *topology*—Derrida rejects political, ethical, and cosmological projects that are grounded in particular places. Ontological constructions, in Derrida’s mind, “have no future, they promise nothing even if, like stupidity or the unconscious, they hold fast to life.” Derrida’s dismissal of ontology is too hasty. The same stones that he threw at the carefully built projects of others can be used to shatter his ephemeral glass house. Hoping for nothing in particular, harboring the empty promise of Derrida’s messianicity, has no future—it is literally pointless and goes nowhere: Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 82. See also Cheah, *Spectral Nationality*; Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 205.

67. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 1.

68. Certain strands of messianic thought contain a misplaced concreteness. For example, Kaushik Sunder Rajan has identified biocapitalists who harbor a fetish logic—entrepreneurs who pin expansive dreams and schemes on a particular pharmaceutical compound in the hope of attracting investors. When collective desires congeal around a specific figure and bring it into contact with the field of historical possibility, these moments of arrival often contain profound disappointments. The clinical trials studied by Sunder Rajan involved some drugs that were too toxic to market to the public. Perhaps all messianic figures contain the ambivalences of the pharmakon. Concreteness placed in them can be poisonous, but in the right doses, they can cure: see Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy*, 48; Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital*; chapter 5 in this volume.